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Howard Schools Planning Major Push on Class Sizes

By Linda Perlstein

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Howard County would launch a major effort to reduce class sizes in first, second and ninth grades under a proposal the school superintendent will present to the school board next month.

The county has seen progress in the few subjects and schools where it has tried to to shrink classes. But, like many school systems, Howard has lacked the resources to tackle class size on a district-wide level. Officials hope that Howard's flush economy, and the installation of a new County Council, will finally allow them to do so.

"Virtually every politician -- from dogcatcher to county executive -- seemed to be running on the issue of improving schools, reducing class size," said Howard School Superintendent Michael E. Hickey. "Everyone seems to be behind it, both on the record and in private conversations."

If Hickey's plan is approved by the school board next month and by the County Council in the spring, by September the average class size in the first and second grades of half the district's elementary schools would be reduced from 25 to 19 students, and the average size of all the county's ninth-grade English and math classes would shrink from 23.5 to 18.5 students.

It would cost the county about \$1.7 million a year to hire 48 new teachers at an average salary of \$35,000 for Hickey's initiative.

Smaller class size, a persistently hot topic in education, has gained political momentum recently. President Clinton included \$1.2 billion in this year's budget for 30,000 new teachers to help reduce class sizes in first through third grades. Both Virginia Gov. James S. Gilmore III (R) and Maryland Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D) have promised to hire thousands of new teachers in the next four years to reduce the student-teacher ratio.

Most Howard County Council members have expressed enthusiasm for Hickey's plan and say its passage is likely. "If that's their number one priority for the school system for the coming year, then I think that's something we can work with," said council Chairman C. Vernon Gray (D-East Columbia).

Montgomery County this year hired the first of 238 teachers in the largest Washington area effort to lower class size. This year, half of

Montgomery's first- and second-grade reading classes have been trimmed to 15 students, and ninth-grade algebra classes have been reduced from about 26 students to 20 students.

As in Montgomery, Hickey chose to target class size in key grades and subjects where research has shown that students' performance can improve with smaller classes.

Educators have said, however, that benefits generally are not apparent until classes get well below 20 students. "I think any teacher would tell you, and the research is also clear, that the reduction of one kid isn't going to make a difference," Hickey said.

Howard would focus on class sizes in first and second grades with the goal that all children be able to read and be mathematically competent before they move on to third grade, he said. Freshman English and math classes would be targeted because success in the first year of high school is crucial to preventing dropouts, Hickey said. Also, starting with the Class of 2005, Maryland students will have to pass state math and English assessments to graduate from high school.

The 17 elementary schools to be included were selected because they have lower academic performance or a high percentage of low-income students or both.

The enthusiasm for class size reduction has its critics, who say the quality of teachers -- ensured by stricter licensing and greater accountability -- is more important than quantity. Supporters cite a plethora of research, including a seminal four-year study that showed Tennessee students of all backgrounds performed much better when in classes of 17 or fewer students.

Howard County schools spokes woman Patti Caplan says that schools have room to add classes but that hiring qualified teachers, especially in the upper grades, is "getting incredibly difficult, there's no doubt about it." The county is counting on its reputation, a good relationship with local teaching colleges and an aggressive recruiting campaign to attract new teachers.

In concert with the effort to reduce class size, Hickey said he wants to count special education students with more intense learning difficulties in general enrollment totals when tallying staffing needs -- a change that would require about 30 more teachers. Until recent years, such students generally were taught in separate classes and were not counted when determining how many classroom teachers were needed.

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